

Tracing Ancestors in England Nonconformist Church Records

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Nonconformist Defined

Catholicism was the main religion in England until 1534 when King Henry VIII severed all ties to the Pope in Rome, and then began the Church of England. Those who chose not to conform to the beliefs and teachings of and to attend services in the Church of England were considered Nonconformists. In spite of persecution Nonconformists—including Catholics, (papists/recusants), Dissenters/Puritans (Congregationalist/Independent, Presbyterians, Baptists) all conducted their own rites and kept their own records as much as allowed. Not all Nonconformist registers survive or were consistently kept, but existing, surviving registers are now mostly available online. View a list of each denomination name and its various branches and respective nicknames: wiki.familysearch.org/; type “England Non-conformist Churches”

Timeline of Non-Conformity

1300s-1400s

- **1324-1385**- John Wyclif translates Bible into English; a spiritual revolution begins
- *The Renaissance*, new learning, ideas, and creative expression

1500s-

- Protestant Reformation: Martin Luther, Guttenberg, John Wycliffe's Bible, John Calvin's doctrines, William Tyndale's English translation of the Bible – *all* Biblical stories of Christ thrill and inspire deeper devotion in worship and spiritual dedication.
- **1534** - England Protestantism arises, Catholic Church severed, and the Church of England established.
- **1534** - Act of Supremacy: All Englishmen owe support to the Church of England.
- **1568** - Puritans split into the Separatists and the Presbyterians (established through teachings of John Calvin).
- **1581** - Independents/Congregationalists evolve from the Separatists.

1600s-

- **1612** - First Baptist Church was organized
- **1620** - Many Nonconformists/ separatists leave for the New World on the Mayflower and other ships.
- **1642 - 1660**- England Civil War. Nonconformists enjoyed a large degree of religious freedom; still many emigrate (New England).
- **1652** - Society of Friends or Quakers began by George Fox
- **1654** - Quaker records begin
- **1660** - Puritans were suppressed by Charles II. Many more emigrate to New England
- **1664** - Conventicle Act was passed. Prohibited Nonconformists from building their own chapels or holding open air meetings in or near a town.

- **1672** - Declaration of Indulgence. Allowed Protestant Nonconformists to apply for licenses for meeting houses and preaching.
- **1673** - Test Act passed. A Penal Law: disallowed Nonconformists from public offices
- **1680's** - Independents and Baptist records began
- **1689** - Act of Toleration. Prior to this act it was compulsory to attend the Church of England services.
- **1695-1705**- Marriage Duty Act. Anglican clergy were required to register the births of any children in their parish who were not baptized. This included many Nonconformists.
- Few Nonconformist registers were kept during this time period.

1700s-

- **1711-1715** - The Occasional Conformity Bill was passed and later repealed. Protestant Nonconformists running for public office had to partake of the Church of England sacrament once a year.
- **1735** - Wesleyan Methodists began with founders John Wesley and Charles Wesley
- **1738** - Welsh Calvinistic Methodist movement began-within the established church
- **1754-1837** - all were required to marry in the Church of England with the exception of Quakers and Jews.
- **1778** - Catholics felt safer to keep records
- **1791** - More than 100,000 Wesleyan Methodists; separation from Church of England; some registers began
- Many Nonconformists registers survive from now, onwards

1800s-

- Nonconformity grows due to the Industrial Revolution. Ten to twenty percent of religious attendees were Nonconformists—depending on county and town or city.
- **1829** - Catholic Emancipation Act passed giving Catholics access to all political and civil rights. Greater religious freedom commences from this time, forward.
- **1837** - Civil birth, marriage, and death records begin. Mormonism introduced in July, 1837; by 1851: 50,000 converts; Nonconformist marriages permitted in chapels or in presence of or by a civil registrar; all Nonconformist registers called for/demanded by Public Record Office; sent to London. By this time, Preston and Liverpool, Lancashire, Northumberland, South Staffordshire, Worcestershire, Middlesex, and Sussex were rife with higher percentages of Nonconformists. Wales was over 80 percent by 1851.

For a comprehensive listing of names of Nonconformist denominations go to www.wiki.familysearch.org – type “England, Nonconformist Church records”; see Nicknames of England’s religious denominations: Papists or recusants (Catholic), Puritans and dissenters (including Congregationalists/Independents, Baptists, Presbyterians) Quakers

How Do I Know If My Ancestor Was a Nonconformist?

1. Family tradition
2. His or her marriage is found, but no prior christening for the ancestor appears in any nearby Church of England parish registers.

3. Parents married in the Church of England, but no subsequent christenings of their children appear in the same or nearby Church of England parish registers.
4. Church of England parish register entry shows only a birth date—*not* a *christening* date.
5. Area where ancestor came from reveals no Church of England christening, but is found in other local records.
6. Census, wills, tax records and church monuments or tombstones bear ancestral names, but not in pre-1754/post-1837 baptisms and marriages in Church of England registers.
7. Church of England registers reference Nonconformists with such words as “papist”, “popish”, Quaker, “dissenter”, ‘of the Methodist chapel’, etc.
8. A civil registration marriage certificate says marriage occurred in Nonconformist chapel.
9. Ancestor has a Biblical name such as Abraham, Rebekah, Moses, Hezekiah, Patience
10. When a post-1837 marriage certificate shows a couple was married before the “Local Superintendent Registrar” of the registration district rather than in front of a vicar
11. When a pre-1837 marriage record in a parish register shows a couple was married “by Licence”. Nonconformists often sought the privacy of a marriage “by Licence”.
12. When only one—usually the first-born—child in a family appears in the parish register of baptisms.

Nonconformist Registers Online

1. www.familysearch.org- FamilySearch microfilmed many Nonconformist registers in the 1970's. Indexes are available on FamilySearch.org linked with some images or via its online catalog (by parish name). For images to most of these registers visit the Family History Library (FHL) or use FamilySearch.org's online catalog and lookup the name of the township to find them. For online indexes to these registers, *always* use/search the main search page “Search” engine at www.familysearch.org/search. *THEN use/search the Historical Records page (stand-alone databases, but only after searching on the main search page. There are significantly larger numbers (millions) of name entries in the main page search engine databases than in the smaller stand-alone Historical Records page!*

Try the following FamilySearch.org online resources containing Nonconformist name entries:

2. **England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975:**
 - Go to Search > click Records > click the map of England > click England. Search the '**England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975**' for indexes to microfilm copies at the Family History Library. Included in this collection are the following:
 - Extracted records from original parish registers.
 - **Dr. Williams' Library-** A central birth registry for Independents, Baptists and Presbyterians. Most of the collection is available at www.familysearch.org or see also at www.bmdregisters.co.uk. (\$)
 - **The Wesleyan Methodist Metropolitan Registry-** A central birth registry for Methodists containing about 10,000 names from 1773-1838. Most of the collection is available at www.familysearch.org or www.findmypast.co.uk.

- **'England and Wales, Nonconformist Record Indexes, 1588-1977' (RG4-8).** A specific Nonconformist registers database. Note: Links to subscription images on BMDregisters.co.uk.
- 3. www.findmypast.co.uk - Findmypast is placing many digital images (with an index) of the Nonconformist church records online. When you search findmypast.co.uk > go to **Search records** > click **A-Z of record sets**. In the Search box type **England** > Click **England and Wales Nonconformist Births and Baptisms** or **Marriages** or **Burials**.
- 4. www.bmdregisters.co.uk- The official website for Nonconformist church registers. Includes registers for Methodists, Wesleyans, Baptists, Independents, Protestant Dissenters, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Unitarians, Society of Friends (Quakers), French Protestants, Dissenters and Russian Orthodox. Also includes overseas records, Dr Williams Library, and other miscellaneous records; hold the most name entries by far.
- 5. www.ancestry.co.uk – see Card Catalog; type “Nonconformist”
- 6. www.thegenealogist.co.uk- Subscription website that links directly the above www.BMDRegisters.co.uk.
- 7. Unfortunately, the above online databases do not reflect all of the Nonconformists of England, which can be researched generally. Many, many names are still left un-indexed in registers only available at county record offices or at local chapels, throughout England, such as especially Methodists, Presbyterians etc.

Nonconformist registers in Libraries, County Record Offices, and Local Churches

Using the FamilySearch Catalog to Find Original register copies if Parish name is known:

Go to www.familysearch.org and log in (Register for free)

1. Go to **Search** > click **Catalog**
2. Next to the **Places** box enter the name of your ancestor's parish- 'England, Yorkshire, Thirsk' and then click **Search**.
3. Click the **Church records** link
4. The name of the religion will be shown next to the Author name. Click the link then click the little camera icon on the far right-hand margin to view at home. You may, if prompted, have to view from (by visiting) a family history center or, the Family History Library in Salt Lake City.

Using FamilySearch Catalog to Find Original register copies if County name is known:

Go to www.familysearch.org and log in (Register for free). Then

1. Go to **Search** > click **Catalog**
2. Click **Keyword**
3. In Keyword box, type name of county or the name of the denomination, or the chapel name of your ancestor (if known)
Click the desired link/name of the place
4. Click the little camera icon on the far right-hand margin to view at home. You may, if prompted, have to view from (by visiting) a family history center or, the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, or an affiliate library.
To access a marriage index for a specific county, follow steps 1-2 above then for step 3

only type the name of the county and country, 'Yorkshire, England'. In Step 4 click the **Church records – Indexes** link, then click the Camera icon.

5. Donald J. Steel's "A Guide to Church of England, Roman Catholic, and other Nonconformist church registers" (county-by-county). Shows what churches exist, years registers began, and their location. Found in: National Index of Parish Registers volume series. Visit: Worldcat.org (see no. 4 below)
6. **Registers at County Record Offices or local Nonconformist chapels**
Records not turned into the Public Record Office (now, National Archives) may have been turned into local County Record Offices or remain in the local chapels themselves. See following link for more info: <http://www.ancestor-search.info/CRO-INDEX.htm>

Strategies for Searching Non-Conformity

- Learn as accurately as possible what Nonconformist denominations were in your ancestor's (Church of England) parish by looking up the name of the parish in the following places (at least 3) websites:
 1. [Topographical Dictionary of England](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/topographical-dict/england) – at www.british-history.ac.uk/topographical-dict/england - 1848 view of town/parish and churches
 2. maps.familysearch.org - 1851 Jurisdictions Map; see at: <http://maps.familysearch.org>. Type the parish name; click **Search** > Click on the name of the parish > a pop-up shows all Non-Church of England denominations.
 3. www.visionofbritain.org.uk - *Imperial Gazetteer of England* – an 1870 view of each town/parish showing all churches
 4. National Indexes of Parish Registers - see online FHL catalog at: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>: Click "Call no."; then type "942 D27ste" – then click camera icon to view online:
- **Two distinct registries** identify many England Nonconformists: Dr Williams Library, and the Methodist Metropolitan Registry. See "Keyword" search in www.FamilySearch.org/search/catalog/search. Entries in these two registries are online.
- County directories, gazetteers, maps, local and county histories, the 1851 religious census--all may help you locate church congregations.
- Nonconformists were required to marry in Church of England parishes from 1754-1837, and from early times respectively, and may have chosen to marry by license in order to marry in privacy. Marriage bonds and allegations can be found in the FamilySearch Catalog under the county name ("Church Records"). Nonconformists were often buried in Church of England churchyards prior to 1853: search burial registers and churchyard headstones.
- Nonconformist church boundaries could cover wide areas and distances. Search both Nonconformist *and* Church of England parish registers, up to at least 20 miles.
- **Reconstruct Nonconformist families** by searching not only in church records but other records like census, civil registration, probate, parish chest, court records, recusant rolls
- Eldest male child may be christened in the Church of England; others in outside churches
- Many Nonconformist people changed their religion back and forth. Search all Nonconformist chapels in a given area if ancestor can't be found in the Church of England (baptisms) registers, or if there's a large gap between children's birth years.
- Baptists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Quakers did not believe in infant baptisms so they recorded the births instead. Baptists had adult baptisms; The

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints baptize(d) at age 8; often joined one or more Nonconformist sects before conversion.

- Quakers did not believe in baptism, so they only recorded births (and marriages).
- One generation may have been Nonconformist while another of the Church of England.